

## Bob Dylan - Another Self Portrait

BY PETER STONE BROWN

When it was released on 1970, Bob Dylan's two-record *Self Portrait* album was generally considered by the press and a lot of his audience to be his first major blunder. The album was comprised of 1969 sessions in Nashville mostly of country-western standards and hits and sessions in New York a year later of traditional folksongs and songs of other writers, with a few live tracks from Dylan's 1969 appearance at the Isle of Wight thrown in as sort of a bonus. Several tracks featured for the first time on a Dylan record a string section, and also for the first time on a Dylan record, female backup vocalists. The Nashville songs seemed perhaps overly slick, the New York songs seemed rough, at times unpolished, and several had been sent to Nashville for additional overdubs (though this wasn't known at the time). There was also a smattering of new original tunes, but one was an instrumental, one was Dylan humming, and the other, the opening song "All the Tired Horses" was sung by backup vocalists and consisted of two lines sing over and over, "All the tired horses in the sun/How'm I s'posed to get any riding done," which was followed by a hum backed by Dylan on barely audible acoustic guitar and a string section. The critics were merciless, many fans were depressed.

Forty-three years later, *Another Self Portrait*, the 10<sup>th</sup> volume of the ongoing "Bootleg Series," puts that era of Dylan's music making in a different light, by putting the majority of the focus on Dylan's New York sessions, both for *Self Portrait* and *New Morning* which followed a few months later. While a couple of outtakes from *Nashville Skyline* are included, the sessions for the country covers are not included, and there are a couple of tracks from sessions roughly around the same time or that are related in some way.

As with some of the previous "Bootleg Series," the album is available in two editions, a two-disc version that is the *Another Self Portrait* album, and the deluxe edition, which also includes for the first time, the complete 1969 *Isle of Wight* concert with The Band which has been remastered and remixed, a remaster of the original *Self Portrait* album, a quite beautiful photo book, and a book with liner notes, credits, and pictures of the session charts.

As it turns out, several of the songs were originally recorded with guitarist David Bromberg and keyboardist Al Kooper and no other musicians. These recordings are the heart of the album and totally revelatory. Included are several traditional songs and songs by other writers. Six songs from the original album are included without the

additional overdubs and are better for it, most notably "Days of 49," "Copper Kettle," and "Belle Isle."

However it is the previously unreleased songs and the assorted outtakes from *New Morning* that provide the excitement, often making the listener wonder why this stuff wasn't on the original album. If such tracks as Tom Paxton's "Annie's Gonna Sing Her Song" and Eric Andersen's "Thirsty Boots" had been on the original album in their original acoustic form, it would have been pretty hard for *Rolling Stone* to start their review with "What is this shit?" Dylan sings both songs with the utmost respect.

There are several delights among the traditional songs. The recordings have a personal feel to them that is not easily achieved in a recording studio. Bromberg, who can show off hot licks as well as any lead player is for the most part reserved, coming in when necessary. Standing out is the ballad, "Pretty Saro," which immediately finds a place high on the list of great Dylan vocals. Equally enticing are "This Evening So Soon," "Tattle O'Day" "Railroad Bill," and an incredible version of the country classic, "These Hands." There are also two songs that appeared on other albums or singles, a stunningly beautiful "Spanish Is The Loving Tongue," with Dylan alone on piano, and a wild version of "House Carpenter," that at times echoes the chords and melody of "Gates of Eden." A more straightforward rendition appeared on the very first "Bootleg Series."

There are also two songs that touch on the blues and the blues tradition, both with a full band and backup singers. "Alberta #3," ("Alberta #1" and "Alberta #2" were on the original album), totally jells and surpasses the previous versions. The other is "Bring Me A Little Water," which is based on Leadbelly's "Bring Me A Little Water, Sylvie" with different lyrics and melodic changes on the verses.

Interestingly enough, the bluesiest track on the album is the original "Working On A Guru," from the *New Morning* sessions with George Harrison playing lead. Both are clearly having fun with Dylan telling Harrison to play his solo again.

The original songs for *New Morning* are also revealing in how much musical exploring Dylan was doing before deciding on which versions would go on the album. There are two versions of "Went To See The Gypsy" and "Time Passes Slowly." The first version of "Went To See The Gypsy" which leads off the album is Dylan and Bromberg on acoustic guitars in a bare bones version, and the second with Dylan alone on electric piano. "Time Passes Slowly" are both with bands,

one with Harrison joining Dylan and a “la la la” chorus” and the other a wildly rocking arrangement.

Two songs from *New Morning* also appear with overdubs that weren’t used, “Sign On The Window,” with a string section, and “New Morning” with an innovative and joyous horn section. Only the French horn from this appeared on the original album.

Songs from other sessions include “Minstrel Boy” from the “Basement Tapes” period, a track that has not previously surfaced among collectors, a demo of “When I Paint My Masterpiece” with Dylan alone on piano, and from the sessions for *Greatest Hits Vol. 2*, an early Dylan song, “Only A Hobo” redone with Happy Traum on banjo.

Finally there is the Isle of Wight Concert with The Band from August 31, 1969. This was Dylan’s only full concert between 1966 and 1974. Four tracks from this were included on the original album and two different tracks are also on the second disc. However, the mix originally had Dylan’s voice so far out front that the balance between voice and band was almost absurd. Bootlegged many times over the years, now finally a good recording of the concert is available. Taking place days after the Woodstock Festival, Dylan was criticized for the length of his set and various other things. His set was an hour, he played 17 songs. Ten of those songs were live debuts, with one a cover.

There are several highlights, but what is interesting is how The Band, a group steeped in R&B takes the songs from *Nashville Skyline* and *John Wesley Harding* and moves them closer to soul, sometimes with a hint of rockabilly. Also, like the *Basement Tapes* and the Woody Guthrie Memorial Concert, the join in singing on the choruses adding a new dimension to all the songs. Levon Helm is particularly nasty on “Highway 61 Revisited,” and Robbie Robertson takes several funky solos throughout, and weaving in and out through the entire performance is the brilliant keyboard work of Garth Hudson on organ and accordion. Dylan is singing throughout with the voice on *Nashville Skyline*. A good indication of where he might have gone, if he continued singing in this style is on “I Pity The Poor Immigrant.”

However the highlight of the show was the short four song solo acoustic set which included a reworked “It Ain’t Me Babe,” and a spectacularly beautiful rendition of the Irish song, “Wild Mountain Thyme.” For those who still think that Dylan can’t sing, this is the recording to silence that notion.

*Another Self Portrait* is not only another road exploring the great American music tradition, but shows another side and dimension to the constant inventiveness of its greatest songwriter.